



CLI CHÉ 2022-06-14

X)-TRACTION

DOCUMENTATION ART, CAPITALISM, EXTRACTION

by Nicole Antebi, Cathy Lee Crane, Jason Livingston, Laurie McKenna, Erin Wilkerson

Prelude by Cathy Lee Crane

In 2021 The Codex Foundation sent out a global invitation for artists to examine their practice, and named it: *Extraction: Art on the Edge of the Abyss...*

How might artists respond to this extraordinary turning point in human history? Can we

acknowledge the damage caused by extraction without inadvertently romancing it? Can we interrupt the narrative of historical progress that glorifies utility, exploitation, and inevitability?

If one hopes to undo the structural logic of “progress and productivity” which got us here, one must refuse that which initiated this vicious circle of material abuse, linearity itself. Extraction is the taking and the pulling of material from an original place and the subsequent conversion of that material into a productive agent: oil into energy, human energy into profits. As poetic documentary filmmakers, we are interested in how our work thinks through the relationships of those things taken and re-used and how that might shed light on the larger problem of global industrial systems for which media is a significant agent. We can no longer avert our attention from the earth and the dispossession of its peoples at the hands of capital. Each of the films from our collective speaks to various levels of displacement and division, and points to how a poetic documentary practice might open pathways for making our way elsewhere.

AN ELEGY by Erin Wilkerson

Tracy Voyles, in her book “Wastelanding”, connects Kit Carson’s army swarming Canyon de Chelly in the Scorched Earth Campaign to cut the five thousand Navajo peach trees lining the river banks, to the mass uranium mining in the same area eighty years later. Carson intended to starve the Navajo, but also, an agrarian indigenous society did not fit the myth of settlement. Since 1944, uranium particles have spread in the wind and the water, infiltrating any peach trees replanted since. The second iteration of the Scorched Earth Campaign, perhaps more deadly than the first.

Void is usually understood as complete emptiness. A black hole of space. In an exact contradiction to feminist theorist Karen Barad’s idea of the void as a colonist apparatus that justifies ownership or discovery of territory what is already cultivated, civilized, and plentiful. It is what is ignored and unacknowledged. The void is the ‘X’, the people and places that do not fit in the myths of imperialism, crossed out, redacted, displaced. It is the unhinged dismissal of theft and enslavement, as a form of ownership. It attempts to hide mechanized violence against nature, women, and people of color. Telling the entangled stories of the void, is a form of counter-archive; the more than human, rather than stories of domination.

The discussion of void must also address the physical and cognitive border walls that differentiate what is seen and what is hidden. A border is a marker of violence, it was created in violence, just as it is maintained in violence. It is a demarcation of what is allowed to be visible, and what is not allowed to be. The opened landscape is a pharmakon, each intervention a delicate dance between survival and annihilation. We are culturally vastly removed from these incisions, as we obtain our goods, neatly packaged, far from where they were sourced.

When asked by a student what would be the first sign of civilization in ancient culture, Anthropologist Margaret Mead responded it was a femur that had been broken and then healed. The act of fixing broken bones requires the care and protection of others. It is a collective act. Like fire, like viruses, like the dust from atomic testing, climate change will not heed borders. Survival depends on collaboration that celebrates and searches out entanglement. We must find

truth and beauty in dissonance, in the disagreeable, in the noise. These stories are meant to be discomfiting. They echo histories, not of the oppressor, but of the oppressed. To document the open wounds. An elegy.

Notes on the City I Love by Nicole Antebi

Extraction is everywhere in the city I love. It lingers in the soil of the former ASARCO smelter, a company ghetto, on the North bank of the Rio Grande/Río Bravo where carcinogens remained in the soil and bodies of workers long after the company moved on.

Extraction through a bait and switch ballot measure the city and binational developers put to voters under the pretense of eminent domain displacing a community of Fronteriza/o/x elders who cleaned and cared for Barrio Duranguito and Segundo Barrio for over half a century.

Extraction of the river, first cut in two, then damned, channelized and fortified as a border until the memory of a once flowing river had almost entirely disappeared from the memory of a divided community.

Extraction, through labor and capital when the US needed braceros, migrant farm workers, brown bodies to fight other brown bodies in foreign wars, and Mexican shoppers who keep El Paso's economy solvent.

Extraction of dignity again and again.

Michelle Garcia writes:

Borders obliterate a system of life that transcends time, life that knows no death. With the making of borders they have tried to make us like them: alone, clinging to a distant illusion of the past and terrified of the future. They have sentenced us, people of the brush country, to an unnamed death—to be erased and forgotten. We are a sacrifice to their greatest ambitions and worst fears. And we have no marker for our loss, no song and no cemetery.

So much extraction exchanges confluence for violence, love for indifference. I want only to extract the lessons of Barrio Duranguito, valuing community above greed and mining only for the best of our humanity.

Notes on Bisbee by Laurie McKenna

In the far southwest corner of Arizona are the post industrial communities of Bisbee and Douglas which hug the border of Mexico. The smelter is gone and the mines and copper industry mothballed, the detritus, waste, plumes and piles remain. The long ago particles of extraction are on the surface and in the air. The industry of nostalgia; the next layer, commodifying the corpse – turning history into flat charm, denying the truth of labor losses and celebrating destruction and corporate indifference. Upon the closing of the mines, word travels in artists circles and a flow of creative youth drifts into Bisbee, in search of opportunity or a respite in the bereft properties and abandoned spaces, desiring a place without an industrial pace. Ironically, and often without malice or even intent, they also are colonists, planting their

culture atop of another. They make the undesirable desirable, cutting a path for spectacle seekers, tourism, and real estate investment; this is the current round of extraction via Yelp, Airbnb, and VRBO.

Bringing media artists work together to challenge and even appropriate the power of the Extractive engine. A rearrangement of the word to (X)trACTION. A response to the force. A creative interruption. Defiance in the face of extraction. In this world of unsustainable material extraction we must acknowledge it. We want to defend the immeasurable, the unquantifiable, and uncontainable aspects of living: wildness, beauty, resilience, impulse, gathering, revolting, defying, remembering, creating.

Film-Silver in The Copper State by Jason Livingston

I have been sitting with Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*, a sequence of poems she composed about the Hawks Nest industrial disaster in Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, regarded as one of the most catastrophic in the United States. Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation knowingly allowed an estimated 700 men, mostly Black, to die in the digging of a river-diversion tunnel. The Hawks Nest Tunnel was engineered to run the New River underground for three miles as part of a hydroelectric plan to boost power generation for a metallurgical plant downstream. When the mineral announced itself, the dig doubled in nature and the days' hours extended. We will never know if Carbide intended to extract the silica – some of the purest in the world, a motherlode – at the start of the infrastructure project, or if company heads pivoted when sampling data marked the zone as holding extraordinary value. What we do know is that Carbide knowingly set aside safe drilling procedures, subjecting the workers to dangerous conditions, far worse, even, than what typically passed as safe for low-skilled mining labor. Workers spoke of dust so thick that a man at twenty feet was but a shadow. An excavation became a murderous extraction. Acute silicosis took the workers' lives and Union Carbide took the profit.

We may be able to rearrange the social relations of modernity, but we cannot return electricity to its material elements in the ground. Extraction, it seems, is with us, and until we determine new processes for rendering electricity, and new means for the storage and transport of energy, we will be taking in order to make. Our collective's charge is to develop a documentary poetics which produces those figures, and an excavation of extraction as a metaphor is the first step.

"Blessing of this innumerable silver,
printed in silver, images of stone
walk on a screen of falling water
in film-silver in continual change
recurring colored, plunging with the wave."
from "The Dam," Muriel Rukeyser

What are we talking about when we talk about metaphor, though? As Imre Szeman and Jennifer Wenzel offer in their instructive essay, “What do we talk about when we talk about extractivism?,” there are metaphors, *and then there are metaphors*. Some metaphors abstract, and others materialize particulars. When is it helpful to resort to the general laws of capital and when is it important to mention the price of wheat in Lagos? Is all capitalism extraction and is all extraction capitalist?

Rukeyser’s documentary poetics mixes its metaphors in the best way. In any given poem she montages congressional testimony with corporate ledgers with modernist verse. Across the poems one witnesses her Popular Front commitments to the Spanish Civil War cut with a forensics of profit-mad silica. She creates relays between different materials and materialities and tracks extractivism’s vertical violence through the x-rays of worker’s seized-up lungs. Rukeyser’s film-silver is fixed, and yet it flows. But where did that silver come from?

(X)-trACTION is a collective of artists/filmmakers founded in 2021. Aware of their own involvement in the extraction of images, ideas, and stories from human and geographical subjects, their work explores the technical and common use of the term “extraction” as well as how to engage and dismantle the conceptual complex from which it emerged and to which it adheres.

Their initial program of short experimental documentary films that engage with histories from the American West will have an in-person screening at the Arsenal in Berlin on July 29, 2022 as part of member Cathy Lee Crane’s residency at the Harun Farocki Institut. Their text is part of a collaboration between Harun Farocki Institut and Berliner Gazette’s “After Extractivism” project. Artwork at the top: Colnate Group, “After Extractivism”, 2022 (cc by nc)

← PREVIOUS NEXT →

META

CONTACT

FORCE-INC/MILLE PLATEAUX

IMPRESSUM

DATENSCHUTZERKLÄRUNG

TAXONOMY

CATEGORIES

TAGS

AUTHORS

ALL INPUT

SOCIAL

FACEBOOK

INSTAGRAM

TWITTER